

Missouri State Archives

Finding Aid [998.292]

MANUSCRIPT COLLECTIONS

Harry Snodgrass Record Collection

Abstract: 78rpm records recorded by pianist Harry Snodgrass, a Missouri State Penitentiary inmate.

Extent: 7 records

Physical Description: Lacquer Acetate Records

Location: Missouri State Archives; Stacks

ADMINISTRATIVE INFORMATION

Alternative Formats: MP3

Access Restrictions: Restricted on case-by-case basis

Publication Restrictions: Standard copyright rules apply

Preferred Citation: [description of item], [date]; *Harry Snodgrass Record Collection*, Record Group 998.292; Missouri State Archives, Jefferson City.

Acquisition Information: Gift with deed; Accession #2002-0041

Processing Information: Processing completed by EW on 05/19/2017. Updated by EW on 03/24/2021.

HISTORICAL AND BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

Harry M. Snodgrass of St. Louis pled guilty to assault with intent to rob in June 1923 and was sentenced to three years in the Missouri State Penitentiary (MSP). He and Joseph Dritsch held up a confectioner in mid-April 1923. Dritsch was shot during the holdup and died on April 14. Snodgrass entered the MSP on June 11, 1923.

Not long after entering prison, it was discovered that Snodgrass was a fine pianist. Radio broadcaster J.M. Witten heard of his talents as a member of Virgil Coombs' Missouri State

Prison Band/Orchestra, authorized in full by Warden Sam Hill. Witten leaped on the story and nicknamed Harry Snodgrass “The King of the Ivories.” Radio station WOS – “Watch Our State” – was run out of the Capitol Building and every other Monday night starting in late 1923, Snodgrass and the other musicians would be allowed to go to the Capitol and broadcast their music live to listeners. By December of that year, he was rather famous and listeners from all over the country would tune in to hear him play. Snodgrass was voted most popular radio entertainer in October 1924 in a nationwide New York radio magazine contest. His promoter J.M. Witten placed second in the most popular radio announcer category.

In January 1924, he appeared before the Parole Board asking for early release. The Board denied his request. However, by the end of that same year, Governor Sam A. Baker had decided that Snodgrass deserved a commutation of sentence based on his good behavior. Snodgrass was scheduled for early release on January 16, 1925.

On the eve of his release from prison, the radio broadcast equipment was brought down from the small studio in the Capitol dome to the House Chambers so that a large audience of hundreds could watch Snodgrass perform live. He played many songs and concluded with “Home Sweet Home.”

Snodgrass was released from the MSP on January 16, 1925 after serving roughly 19 months of his three-year sentence. Fans had been sending in gifts over the last few months of his incarceration and he had accumulated over \$3,500 from the public, which was presented to him upon his release. Moreover, J.M. Witten resigned his position at WOS Radio in order to become Snodgrass’s full-time manager.

Starting in 1925, the recording company Brunswick Balke Collender Company began making recordings of Snodgrass’s piano solos at the behest of his new manager. Witten would introduce most of the pieces on the records. The pair traveled to Chicago at least twice to make these recordings (once in 1925 and again in 1926). Snodgrass began earning \$600 a week (roughly equivalent to \$8368 in 2016 dollars) with 25% of that going to Witten.

Not all the public was enamored with Harry Snodgrass. The Indianapolis Daily News says of concert attendees of his in 1926, “it is the association of crime and criminals with an art, for nine out of ten who attended in Indiana probably were led there by the publicity given Snodgrass’ criminal life. When music must take a back seat for the exhibition of a criminal, the theater-going public is in need of education.” (reprinted in The St. Joseph Observer (see “Related Materials” below for full citation))

On February 3, 1928, Snodgrass’s citizenship was restored so that he could once again join the musicians’ union. Snodgrass’s vaudevillian tour did not last long. By late 1928, he was back to irregular work in small nightclubs in and around the Midwest. He also spent time as a hot dog vendor. He received a brief re-emergence of fame when the 1929 hybrid talkie/silent film *Weary River* directed by Frank Lloyd was released. The film was loosely based on his life and featured Richard Barthlemess as a gangster who goes to prison and achieves fame as an incarcerated radio singer and pianist.

After the film buzz died down, Snodgrass returned once again to relative obscurity. His wife Louise filed for divorce in January 1933 claiming abandonment. Ultimately, he became suddenly ill and died at his ex-wife's home in Springfield, IL on September 2, 1937. He had one son.

Discography:

Brunswick 78rpm discs:

BRN 2850 released 02/18/1925: "Three O'Clock in the Morning" / "The Moonlight, a Waltz and You"

BRN 2852 released 02/18/1925: "Dusting the Keys" / "Blue Evening Blues"

BRN 3137 released 02/07/1926: "Canadian Capers" / "The World Is Waiting for the Sunrise"

BRN 3138 released 02/07/1926: "Land of My Sunset Dreams" / "The Prisoner's Song"

BRN 3238 released 04/xx/1926: "Melody of Love" / "Mighty Lak' A Rose"

BRN 3239 released 04/xx/1926: "Along Miami Shore"* / "Maple Leaf Rag"

unissued BRN: "Sabbath Chimes" / "Melody of Love"

*also available as a Victor 78rpm disc

QRS Piano Rolls:

QRS 3113, released ???: "Farewell (Marimba Ballad)"

QRS 3114 released April 1925: "Land of My Sunset Dreams (Waltz Ballad)"

QRS 3115 released ???: "Three O'Clock in the Morning (Waltz Ballad)"

QRS 3163 released August 1925: "In the Shade of the Old Apple Tree"

QRS 3164 released August 1925: "Down By the Old Mill Stream"

QRS 3165 released August 1925: "Garland of Old Fashioned Roses"

QRS 3482 released June 1926: "Along Miami Shore (Ballad)"

QRS 3614 released September 1926: "My Wild Irish Rose"

QRS 3615 released September 1926: "Mighty Lak' a Rose (Ballad)"

QRS 81243/3092 released ???: "I Found a Way to Love You (Now I Can't Find a Way to Forget)"

Wurlitzer Concert Piano Orchestra roll:

WCPO 9197 released ???: "Farewell, a Ballad" / "I Found a Way to Love You, But I Can't Find a Way to Forget, a Waltz" / "Land of My Sunset Dreams, a Waltz Ballad"

ADDITIONAL DESCRIPTIVE INFORMATION

Related Collections

MS369 Bob Priddy Collection

RG005 Secretary of State – Commutations of Sentence

RG005.20 Secretary of State – Pardons & Restorations of Citizenship

RG211 Missouri State Penitentiary

RG114 Department of Health and Senior Services. Missouri Death Certificates. Joseph Dritsch, Jr. Certificate #3907, dod 04/14/1923.

http://www.sos.mo.gov/images/archives/deathcerts/1923/1923_00016323.PDF

RG211 Missouri State Penitentiary Numerical Register. Vol. JJ p. 186, inmate no. 25852.

RG005 Commutation of Sentence. Vol. 3 p. 123, inmate no. 25852. 01/15/1925.

RG005.20 Restoration of Citizenship. ox 119 Folder 3, inmate no. 25852. 02/03/1928.

Additional External Resources

“Freedom.” The MissouriNet Blog. N.d. Retrieved May 19, 2017.

<http://blog.missourinet.com/harry-snodgrass/freedom/>

“Harry Snodgrass.” The MissouriNet Blog. N.d. Retrieved May 19, 2017.

<http://blog.missourinet.com/harry-snodgrass/>

Laird, Ross. Tantalizing Tingles: A Discography of Early Ragtime, Jazz, and Novelty Syncopated Piano Recordings, 1889-1934. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press. 1995.

“Missouri State Prison Pianist Is Gaining a Nation-Wide Reputation.” Shelby County Herald Vol. LIII No. 47. Shelbyville, MO: 19 December 1923. P. 3.

“Not Glorifying Him: Snodgrass the Pardoned Criminal Is Criticized by Many Leading Papers.” The St. Joseph Observer Vol. XX No. 26. St. Joseph, MO: 05 March 1926. P. 1.

“St. Louis Man, in Prison for Robbery Wins Fame by Playing Over Radio.” Daily Democrat Tribune Vol. 47 No. 186. Jefferson City, MO: 07 March 1924. P. 2.

The State Historical Society of Missouri in Columbia maintains collection [#C3971 Robert P. Christeson Collection, 1808-1995](#) and [#C4035 University of Missouri-Columbia, Missouri Folk Arts Program Records, 1982-2012](#).

Witten, J.M. “When the Prison Band Goes on At WOS: How the Missouri State Prison Musicians Captivate Their Radio Audiences to the Extent of 2000 Letters a Concert, Not to Mention Sympathy, Cigars, and Cigarettes.” Radio Broadcast Vol. 4 No. 1. New York: April 1924. Pp. 205-206. <http://www.vacuumtubeera.net/RadioBroadcast-Vol-04-1924-01.pdf>.

78RPM RECORDS, 1925-1926

Extent: 7 records

Arrangement: Chronological

Scope and Content

This series contains Brunswick 78rpm lacquer acetate discs of Snodgrass's piano recordings.

*These tracks have been digitized by the Internet Archive and have been burned to Manuscript DVD #1, available in the Reference Room.

Container List

Location	Box	Folder	Contents	Date
	120		<u>Brunswick #2850:</u> Side A*: "Three O'Clock in the Morning" by Terriss & Robledo. Includes an introductory announcement by J.M. Witten. Side B*: "The Moonlight, a Waltz and You" by Snodgrass, Koehler & Hird. (2 copies)	02/18/1925
	120		<u>Brunswick #2852:</u> Side A*: "Dusting the Keys" by Killalea & Claypoole. Includes an introductory announcement by J.M. Witten. Side B: "Blue Evening Blues" by Rose, Kahn & Burton. (2 copies)	02/19/1925
	120		<u>Brunswick #3137:</u> Side A: "Canadian Capers" by Chandler, White & Cohen. Includes an introductory announcement by J.M. Witten. Side B: "The World Is Waiting for the Sunrise" by Lockhart & Seitz. Includes an introductory announcement by J.M. Witten.	02/07/1926
	120		<u>Brunswick #3138:</u> Side A: "The Prisoner's Song" by Massey. Includes an introductory announcement by J.M. Witten. Side B: "Land of My Sunset Dreams" by Hall. Includes an introductory announcement by J.M. Witten.	02/07/1926
	120		<u>Brunswick #3239:</u> Side A: "Along Miami Shore" by Hirsch, Alman, Snodgrass & Warren. Includes an introductory announcement by J.M. Witten. Side B: "Maple Leaf Rag" by Scott Joplin. Includes an introductory announcement by J.M. Witten.	April 1926